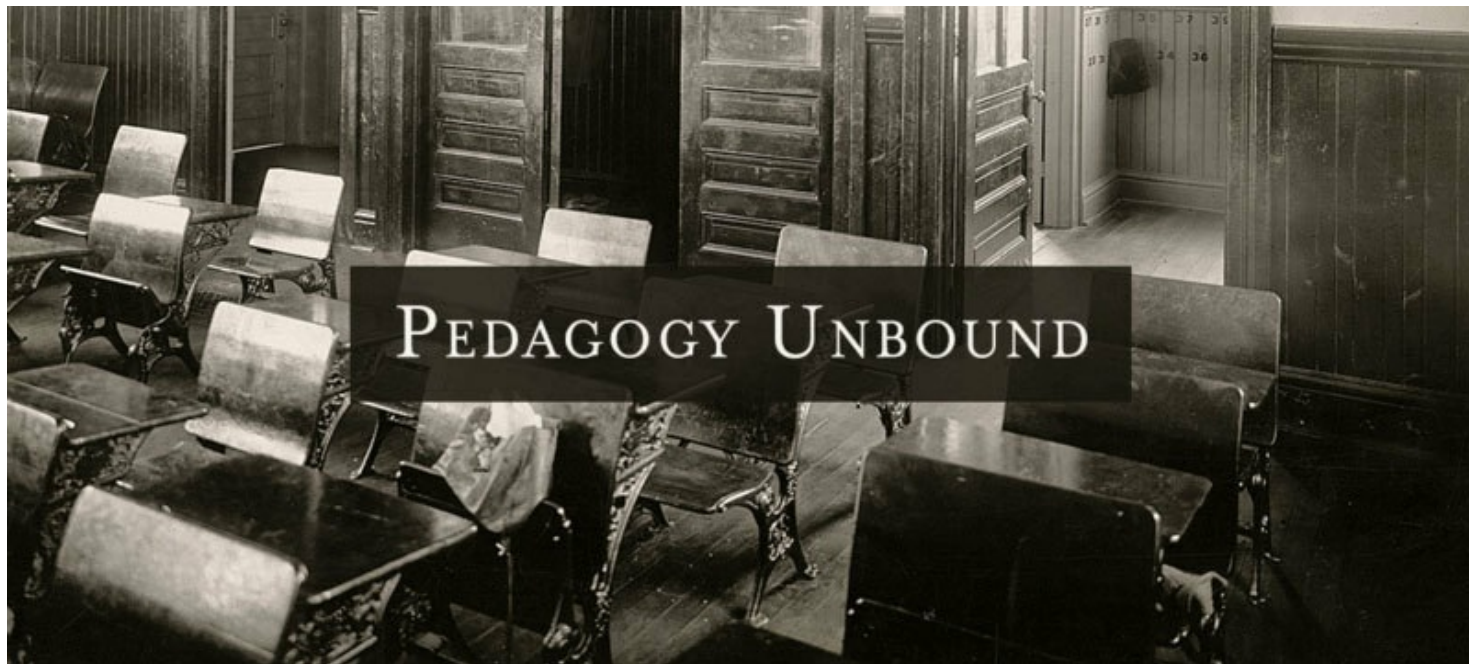# Skills First, and Let Content Follow

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One of the oldest — and most tired — debates in the education world is about skills versus content. For years, especially in K-12 circles, teachers, administrators, and education researchers have debated whether skills or content are more important for students to learn.

The apparent dichotomy has proven surprisingly sturdy. In an April 2016 report [on skills as "the new canon,"](#) *The Chronicle* detailed an effort at Emory University to shift faculty focus toward teaching the skill of using and evaluating evidence. The story quoted Emory lecturer Robert Goddard, who worried that the move to skills-focused courses was "doing a disservice to the students by not having a more coherent, uniform body of content to deliver." Such a conception suggests a zero-sum game: More time spent on skills necessarily means less time spent on content.

But if a consensus has emerged in this long-standing debate, it's one that pushes against an either/or approach.

I would argue — and I don't think many people would disagree with me at this point — that skills versus content is a false choice; our students need both. As John Schlueter, an instructor of English at St. Paul College, wrote, in [a recent essay:](#) "Classrooms must move beyond being places where content is delivered and become places where students learn how to process that content." Content is present in both cases. What matters is whether we merely "deliver" it or teach students the skills that allow them to put that content to use.

[Much research has suggested](#) that skills by themselves — isolated from any knowledge of disciplinary content — are very difficult, if not impossible, to teach. We learn important skills through practice in specific domains, and

transferring those skills to other domains is not straightforward. Similarly, content without the skills to apply it is merely trivia. What good is it to know a lot about a subject if you don't know what to do with that knowledge?

So we need both skills and content. But for instructors with a class to teach tomorrow, I think it still matters which one has a priority in our thinking. The way we conceptualize our tasks as teachers can have a great impact on how we teach. While rejecting the skills/content dichotomy, I think it's important that we focus on skills first, and let content follow.

When we define our courses by their content, we almost necessarily force ourselves into a "coverage" mindset. Many of us still show up to class with a plan that lists the topics we'll go over. By focusing on what material we need to cover, or even on what content students need to learn, the danger is that we just tell students the material — which is, after all, the most straightforward way to get it to them. But we know pretty confidently that just telling students information is not a very good way to help them retain it.

By contrast, when we focus on skills first, we are much more likely to use active learning strategies, the sort of classroom activities that researchers have found to be most effective for long-term learning. By conceptualizing the class period as a time when students will practice a certain skill, we almost automatically ensure that they will be active learners. When we prioritize skills, we ask "what will students do today?" instead of "what will I cover today?". The former question builds active learning into your approach, no matter what content you have to cover.

If you take this approach, you're not choosing skills at the expense of content; it isn't one or the other. Luckily, when you lead with skills, it's easy for content to follow. Begin your course planning by thinking about what skills you want students to practice. Design class activities that help students learn how to execute those skills on their own. (David Didau's model teaching sequence is a great way to think about this process.) Then make the "what" of your activities the content that you want your students to learn.

If you want students to practice the skill of revision, have them revise one of the course readings according to a set of specifications ("What if the author wanted to use the same evidence to argue the opposite point?"). If you want students to practice making a computational engineering model, have them try to project what happens to a bridge when an earthquake of a certain magnitude hits. If you want students to work on their research skills, have them find, compare, and evaluate two sources with opposing views on that week's topic. By putting course content to use, students will learn that content more easily — and will be more likely to retain it as well.

It's not difficult to integrate content into the skills you ask your students to practice. In fact, it's much easier to start with skills and then add content than it is to do the reverse.

What I'm suggesting is more about your mindset as a teacher than anything else. The skills-versus-content debate is not something we need to fight about anymore. Our students need to understand important course content and develop the skills to apply that content critically. But by subtly tweaking the way you approach your courses, by first thinking about skills, you can ensure that students learn both skills and content in a way that will stay with them for the long haul.

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